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ABSTRACT

The first reading assignment one educator gives his first-year composition students helps answer their questions about what college work will be like. For this reason, he gives them Neil Postman's "Amusing Ourselves to Death" to read, a book which shows that the late 20th century is undergoing a vast epistemological shift, moving from the "typographic mind" to the "age of show business." Postman concerns himself with the formal structures of human thinking and points to the invention of the telegraph and modern advertising methods in the 1890s as the germinal source in this epistemological shift. For him, technology "legitimized" the idea of context-free information, focusing on novelty, interest, and curiosity. Television's power lies in the seduction of an image; Postman's purpose is "to make the epistemology of television visible again." The book surveys and analyzes the effects of television on various forms of public discourse: news, religion, political discussion and campaigning, and education. Postman notes that television's contribution to educational philosophy is the idea that teaching and entertainment are inseparable--an idea he finds lethal to students' ability to develop critical thinking. The first assignment asked the students to write three sentences in their notebooks that they thought captured Postman's essential point in any given chapter, and also asked for questions. The students moved from halting guesses to clear and confident assessments--they read better. Examples of their comments illustrate their progression in critical thinking. (NKA)

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Neil Postman's Amusement: The Enemy with a Smiling Face

I was listening to a program on National Public Radio driving to a casino that the state of Wisconsin granted to its native Americans. I don't recall precisely the subject of the program, but the announcer was asking multiple choice question to a contestant. The question was as follows: "What percentage of our waking hours are we within earshot of a television? over fifty percent? fifty percent? less than fifty percent? I guessed correctly--over fifty percent of our waking hours finds most of the population within earshot of a television. (It was the only luck I would have all day.)

Except for the luck in providing me an idea for my first year composition course. I view the first reading assignment we give to our first year students--very likely their first contact with college texts--to be an important selection, largely because it answers their wondering "what will college work be like?" No doubt many fear a geometric rise in difficulty, no doubt some question their ability to compete, no doubt some hope that their experience with texts will be different from their high school's. Besides addressing and answering these various anxieties, our selection of a first text also sets a tone, providing a set of expectations that can serve both ourselves and our students.

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I wanted to select a text that would challenge them intellectually while engaging them inside a subject that was both familiar and pleasing to them. So, we read Neil Postman's 1995 book Amusing Ourselves to Death. Postman's subtitle, "Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business" points to his subject and his purpose. He argues that the late 20th century is undergoing a vast epistemological shift, moving from what he called the Typographic Mind to the Age of Show Business. At the center of this epistemological shift sits television. Yet Postman is no usual technological luddite, attacking television for tired, familiar reasons. He concerns himself with the formal structures of human thinking: by this he means that since Gutenberg, we have been an Age of Exposition, "a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression" developed through the demands of the printed word. This is important, because "knowledge of every kind [is] transferred to and made manifest through the printed page" (33).

However, Postman points to the invention of the telegraph and modern advertising methods in the 1890s as the germinal source in this new epistemological shift. He writes that the telegraph "made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence" (65). By this he means that technology "legitimized" the idea of context-free information, loosening the value of information from any connection it might have to social or political decision-making and action, focusing instead on novelty, interest, and curiosity (61). In sum, technology commodified information or as Thoreau

implied, telegraphy made relevance irrelevant. Not surprisingly, television's power lies in the seduction of the image, a seduction that Postman argues "undermined traditional definitions of information, news, and, to a large extent, of reality itself" (74). Or, as he succinctly observes, "For countless Americans, seeing, not reading, became the basis for believing" (74). His book's purpose is stated unequivocally "to make the epistemology of television visible again" (80).

The remainder of the book surveys and analyzes the effects of television on various forms of what he calls "public discourse": television news, televised religion, political discussion and campaigning, and, most germane to our concerns, education. About this last area, he notes that "television's principle contribution to educational philosophy is the idea that teaching and entertainment are inseparable" (146). He claims this idea is both pervasive and lethal to our students' ability to develop critical thinking because "learning to be critical and to think conceptually and rigorously do not come easily to the young but are hard-fought victories" (146) requiring restraint, sequential learning, perseverance, perspiration, and the submerging of individual pleasures. Yet, the yoking of teaching and entertainment undermines such necessary rigor. In fact, rather wickedly, Postman develops three "commandments" of televised education:

One: Thou shalt have no prerequisites.

Two: Thou shalt induce no perplexity.

Three: Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt.

Ultimately, the danger of television and education is that students "will have learned that learning is a form of entertainment, or, more precisely, that anything with learning can take the form of an entertainment, and OUGHT TO.

I have left out of my short survey much documentation, stunning philosophical nuances, rich observations, and the sheer wisdom of this book. BUT--I knew the book's level of intellectual discussion, the range of allusion, even the sophisticated vocabulary would be daunting to first year students. So, I decided to proceed slowly, granting our engagement enough time for a (hoped) process of gradual enlightenment to emerge. First, I challenged them by an up-front admission that this was a difficult book to read--mentioning that they would likely toss it against the wall in frustration--but that they'd grow into the book. Then still proceeding slowly, I assigned them to write three sentences in their notebooks that they thought captured Postman's essential point in any given chapter. This ended up being a valuable exercise--by narrowing their summary to a short reply released them from the agony of comprehensiveness. Also, I asked that they jot down any questions that they had in a given chapter--any questions. Well, two encouraging results emerged. First, generally the students moved from halting, uncertain guesses about a chapter's essence to rather clear and confident assessments--they read better. Second, often an entire class period was spent addressing student questions. Now, some of you might think this a waste of valuable time, but I view it differently--at first I explained at length, often discursively, but the apparent diffusion of focus tended rather to demonstrate Postman's argument--

thinking requires making connection, based on prior knowledge, from which we gain insight--in other words, the class DEMONSTRATED TYPOGRAPHIC THINKING. Also, and perhaps as importantly, student involvement increased as they noticed that their mental activity became the foregrounded subject daily. This "broke the ice" in an unartificial way, creating, I think, an interested seriousness.

After three weeks I assigned their first writing assignment--to take an aspect of Postman's book and either attack or agree with his judgments based on their experience in the student-defined subject. I was gladdened by the array of topics: many discussed the role of television, video, etc. in their educational experience, some watched either television news broadcasts for a few days or a series of TV preachers and compared their experience to Postman's diatribes; others discussed political ads (this was fall 1996), and several others probed into personal areas--their conversations, the presence of TV in their families' home life, the personal gratification that TV delivers to them. What I desired in the assignment was that they take an aspect of Postman's argument, understand and summarize it, then become something like social scientists--they had to engage in "data collection" (focused observation), assess it in relation to Postman's arguments, and then comment. In short my purpose replicated Postman's: to make visible television's epistemology. Or, to use the language of Russian formalism, I wanted to defamiliarize their television experience.

I cannot say it was a resounding success--at least not the subversive element in my intentions, for many students wrote solid, even intelligent papers that sang TV's

praises. Their plaudits ranged from thanking it for providing crucial information:

> "Nike shoes and shirts, Levi's jeans, and Arizona jeans are just a few of the things I have thanks to television."

To a second student noting TV's functionalism:

> "All the studying during the day makes me up tight, but when seven o'clock on Thursday comes around I sit back and laugh at the shows with my classmates: Friends, E.R., and Seinfeld.

Another uses logic and calculus for her argument:

> I have figured out that I have spent several thousands of hours watching television throughout my short 18 years. This past week I watched over 25 hours. That is one whole day out of the week just spent on watching television. Postman thinks watching TV is bad for you. But when I watch TV, I generally laugh a lot, and it has been proven that laughter is good for your health. Therefore, I watch television for my health.

Such spurious logic aside--or was she being sarcastic, I'm not sure--many student papers revealed an emergent suspiciousness of television effects, ranging from family communication to the staple of daily conversation. One returning student anguished over his repetitive use of television and its effects on his six year old daughter. He ends with a moment of illumination. He observed:

> "The other day she and her friend dressed up like one of the sexy actors played on the Wayman Brothers. They had tight skirts and make-up on.

> They came downstairs thinking it was cute and wanted to dance for me and my wife."

Yet his attention to this assignment forced him to recognize his behavior in the drama of the every day:

> "When I am ignoring her for the television she usually goes to her room . . . and copies me by turning on the tube. She can always find attention from the television."

He concludes this epiphanic paper by advocating for "support groups for TV addicts" contributing to TV an "hypnotic trance" that imperils many who "suffer" this disease. His words are telling.

Due to the brevity of this presentation I cannot adequately present the range and resonance of the student observations--but these moments of illumination are the nexus of my intended, subversive tactic. The task demanded they draw on all the skills Postman feared modern technology is diminishing. Behind the assignment lay my belief--taking my instruction from reader-response theory that reading is an <u>event</u>, that interpretation is an <u>event</u>--meaning that reading is a verb too, and that therefore time enters the interpretive process. By that I mean that writing too was an event in time and moments of vision are the end results of a spectrum of thinking activity. So, let me finish with a few student observations:

On his conversations, one wrote:

> "Through careful observation of my and my friends conversations (both

> style and content), I have determined that almost everything we talk about involves television in one way or another, or the way we say things mimics the style of television. Our conversations take the shape of verbal "channel surfing" as we leap from topic to topic and idea to idea. . . . It is as though someone is constantly changing the channel between our ideas, from Comedy Central to MTV to CNN, with no real topical destination in mind."

One woman sat with a group of men watching football:

> "During commercial break I witness an extraordinary phenomenon. Each of these three guys in the room takes turns specifically listing facts about their favorite players and teams, from size to favorite hobby to favorite offensive technique. Acknowledging the uselessness of this trivia game, I laugh to myself. Yet it amuses them to such an extent that words cannot describe."

Yet women are not immune, as one young woman noticed while watching soaps:

> "I noticed that we talked about the characters as if they were actual people, expressing every emotion we felt towards those people, whether . . . love, hate, annoyance, or even pity. For example, Ann said, 'I feel so sorry for Carrie. How can her sister do that to her?' Tina said, 'Sami is such an idiot, she should have just married Lucas instead.'"

A serious, Christian student, disturbed by her viewing TV preachers with Postman

lenses, wrote:

> "Religious programs on television give a false sense of God. Following the info blurbs, a close-up of a child's face appeared, and money was discreetly asked for by the 700 Club. Words scrolled across the screen, reminding the audience not to forget their pledge of support, followed by a soft voice, 'Thank you for caring.' What they don't realize is that God . . . isn't anything like humans--he doesn't give us a puppy-dog face and ask us for money, neither does he relate supporting to "caring"." As Postman said, "On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as a second banana.

One student explained the true menace of the sound byte eloquently when, discussing TV news and clips of foreign disturbances:

> Protests against governments in foreign countries are another example. As Americans, living together in a democratic society, we think--"Why can't they just be happy with the government they have and leave well enough alone?" We have no idea about their culture, the years before these troubled times, or what led the people to revolt. All we know is the forty-five seconds they talked about it on the news, yet we have enough gumption to have something to say about it.

Yet, despite Postman's warning, the creeping intrusion of television and technology into both our classrooms and our student educational expectations grows. All I hear

from administrators is the new hobby-horse to solve our fiscal problems: long-distance learning. Ah, the new mantra. Well, perhaps we should take heart from one student, arguing for the uses of technology in the classroom, who exhibited no small irritation with Postman, exclaiming, after all, "Television and technology are NOT the Anti-Christ"!